



KOSOVO

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Ending the Balkan curse

By Ilana Bet-El, The Guardian

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Kosovo and its status is already going the way of all Balkan disputes: it is in danger of first being talked into a storm, before any heavier elements are introduced. Indeed, at a massive talk-fest on the Balkans in Brussels yesterday it merrily dominated proceedings, though all the other parts of the region were eager to get a look-in. On the other hand, all the talk also produced something useful: Bozidar Djelic, the deputy prime minister of Serbia, solemnly proclaimed that if Kosovo unilaterally declared independence Serbia would resist the move with all available means, but without the use of force. Other Serbian officials have claimed as much before, but this time the words were said before an audience in Brussels and on the same stage as Carla Del Ponte. If this actually happens, it means there would finally be a Balkan confrontation that did not become a conflict - which would be a true precedent in the region.

One good thing about the looming deadline for an agreed solution to the status of Kosovo (December 10) is that it may finally remove the distorting issue of whether the situation is unique, as the US and the EU claim, or a precedent, as Serbia and Russia claim. So much energy has been expended by both sides in defending their positions on this matter that there can hardly be any left to search for a solution. I would humbly suggest a compromise that enables both definitions: the Nato intervention that led to the *de facto* independence of Kosovo was unique, since it has never been repeated anywhere else, as the oppressed and victimised citizens of Burma, Zimbabwe, Darfur and various other despot-ridden hellholes unfortunately know only too well. The attempt to give Kosovo *de jure* independence by simply hacking off part of a sovereign state without its consent would be a precedent.

There is every chance such phrasing would not be welcomed in the EU or the US, but it is no less part of the reality of the incoherent status of Kosovo as the original sin committed by Serbia, in its attempts to "ethnically cleanse" the region of its Albanian majority by driving hundreds of thousands out of the region, destroying their papers in the process. As such, it is incumbent upon all sides, Serbian and Kosovan as well as EU and US, to seek a compromise.

The first element of the compromise should be linguistic: the west should stop talking about "owing" Kosovo its independence, or "punishing" Serbia, or indeed that any solution other than independence would reward Serbia for its crimes. Seeking a solution must be the result of hard-headed thinking rather than emotion; and such hard-headedness must consider the reality that Balkan wars have been started over a lot less than the status of a province.



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The second element must focus on what compromise means: finding a just solution for both sides, which would inevitably involve painful concessions by both. Serbia must accept that the vast majority of Kosovans do not wish to live within Serbia, and that it is therefore inevitable that the province, at least in its entirety, cannot remain part of its state. On the other hand, the Albanian majority of Kosovo must accept that Serbia has a deep emotional attachment to parts of Kosovo, which date back centuries.

The third element must therefore focus on agreed partition, which is not an international precedent, unlike imposed independence, which is. Partition holds within it the inter-alia acceptance of independence - but on agreed terms. The crucial Serb areas in Kosovo are in its north and in the south, which is geographically inconvenient, especially since the majority of the monasteries considered sacred to the Serb Orthodox religion are in the latter. The compromise can therefore be to offer Serbia part of the north in a partition scenario, with the option of Kosovan Serbs moving there if they wish; and giving the monasteries a special international status, under a separate international authority rather than the Kosovan government.

It is not a perfect solution, but there is no such thing: for the international community the Balkan curse has long been that inaction enables the malign sides to conquer alone and intervention helps them. In this case fears could be voiced that the suggested partition enables ethnic cleansing by offering the Kosovan Serbs the option of quitting the province-state - but the reality is that the option simply puts it clearly on the table rather than allowing it to happen once an Albanian Kosovan government takes office and the Serb minority flees.

There are no golden bullets in the Balkans, only hard lead ones. Solutions come hard, but the least we can do is seek one that not only avoids bloodshed now - but does not lay the foundations for a future war. Agreed partition may offer such an option.